COVER PAGE

Emile — A Remembrance

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The Pittsburgh dog pound was a lot like a jail. It was obvious nobody much cared about it. The floors were smooth concrete, painted a reddish-brown. The plaster walls were a grimy yellow. A few incandescent lights, each covered with a little wire birdcage, hung from the ceiling. In a large room behind the front desk was a holding cell enclosed with cyclone fencing, maybe twenty feet square, with a small benchlike ledge in the back. In this pen, the evening I went there, were about thirty dogs of all sizes and kinds. When I walked into the room, pandemonium erupted inside the cage. The dogs crowded around the fence, barking, yowling, wagging their tails, pushing and shoving one another for my attention. One dog, though, stayed up on the ledge, aloof, disdaining this scene. Even when I reached in to pet the other dogs and let them lick me in their eager friendliness, he acted as if I weren't there. I talked to the dogs, and to several of them individually. The dog on the ledge was unimpressed. This was all beneath his dignity. Of course, I couldn't resist him. "I'll take that one," I told the keeper. That night he got his name: Emile. After Emile Zola. He seemed to like it.

He was about a year old when I found him. Whoever'd owned him hadn't wanted him or couldn't keep him. He was a street dog. Tough. Independent. Proud. He took no crap from man nor beast. But he was gentle, too, and sometimes his brown eyes could look at you with such softness, such incomprehensible depth, such compassion that you couldn't help but feel fixed in the gaze of a supernatural consciousness.

He had the general conformation and coloring of a german shepherd—black and tan, with a splash of white on his chest—but he weighed only half what a big shepherd does. His silken ears were floppy, like a hound's. He was through and through a mongrel, just like me.

We lived for a while in a third-story walkup apartment with my girlfriend. It was a

long, narrow place constructed beneath the ridgeline of the building's sloping roof and generally organized around a long hallway. The bedroom was at one end, toward the front of the building overlooking the street. Down the hall on one side was another room, and then a bathroom, across from which the staircase came up from the floor below. At the back end of the hallway was the kitchen, spacious enough for a dining table, and beyond that was a door that led out onto a tar-surfaced flat roof maybe fifteen feet across. Beyond the edge of the roof was empty space, occupied to some extent by the upper branches of old buckeye and black maple trees, and a vertical drop of nearly thirty feet into the back yard.

In the summertime after supper we would often sit around the oak dining table, talking and relaxing, with the back door open to let in the cool evening breeze. Pigeons would frequently alight on the roof's edge and Emile took to launching himself in a running charge across the kitchen and onto the asphalt roof, directly at them. They'd flap noisily away just as the dog, front legs stiffened and splayed out before him, would come sliding to a halt a few inches from the roof's edge. He and I, in those days, had hair-trigger reflexes, and he never fell. He sure scared the hell out of me a few times, though—especially the first time I saw him do it in the rain.

Emile's ebullience occasionally got him into trouble. One night he and I were walking down to the local coffee house. He always wanted to go wherever I went, but he didn't often get to accompany me on my evening jaunts about town and he was naturally ecstatic to be along this time. As we walked he would trot ahead of me, checking out all the trees and hydrants and front yards and cats and whatever else might arouse his keen curiosity. From time to time I'd catch up with him and even pass him by while he investigated some especially interesting phenomenon. Then after a while he'd come trotting up behind me, often, I thought, just laughing like crazy. It was such good fun.

At a corner along our way this night we passed in front of a large gothic

Presbyterian church which was built on a berm of earth so that to enter it you had to climb a series of steps to a level ten or twelve feet above the street. Our route turned here and proceeded along the side of the church, which occupied most of a city block. A patio atop the berm and at the church's main level ran alongside the building for maybe half this distance. A two-foot stone wall bordered the patio and formed the top of a wall that supported the mound on which the church was built. The outside of the wall dropped vertically ten or twelve feet to the street level.

I'd turned the corner and was walking along the dark sidewalk, lit only dimly by a distant streetlight, shaded by big old trees. Emile was behind me somewhere; I'd seen him earlier trot up the steps to the church, where no doubt he'd marked some territory, and I expected to see him again presently. Then all of a sudden I heard him running across the flagstone patio above and behind me, and I turned just in time to see him fly to the top of the wall and then, unable to stop himself, leap off into darkness. I don't know whether he really knew at first how far away the ground was, and I had a moment of fear as he sailed through the air. He hit the ground so hard I heard a "whoof" as the concussion knocked the wind out of him, but he was quickly back on his feet and shaking it all off. He ran over to me with that daredevil look he often had in his eyes, as if to say, "Hey, did you see that? I can fly!"

Each year I had to buy from the county a little dog license with an official-looking number on it. These were aluminum, oblong, about half an inch wide and maybe an inch long. Two rivets held each license to his leather collar, and in time he acquired a great many of them. Moreover, every few years he had to be vaccinated for rabies or distemper or some such thing and on these occasions we'd get a tag, round or square, often brass-colored, with an S-shaped hook that was designed to be hung from the collar's leash snap ring. The sound produced by all these tags—which I called his medals—was distinctive and almost musical. Emile loved this adornment and seemed to be proud of his medals. Whenever I removed his collar he'd become noticeably anxious

and subdued. When I'd finished bathing him or adding a new medal to it, he'd come eagerly over and push his head through it as I held it out for him. I think he regarded it as a symbol of his venerable place in our partnership.

Despite his general easygoing nature, Emile would not stand down to any dog, no matter how big or fierce it was. He was lightning quick, an expert at getting inside, inflicting a wound, and getting out again before the other dog could grapple with him. In a sudden moment he would become a blurred fury, bobbing, weaving, ducking, slashing, puncturing hide and flesh. After a few snarling seconds of incomprehensible chaos, the two dogs would usually disengage and go their separate ways. Emile almost always gave better than he got, and he always acted afterward as if nothing whatever out of the ordinary had happened.

I noticed early on that he was considerably more apt to start a fight when he was on a leash. In part perhaps this was because he felt protective of me. But mostly, I think, it was because the leash restricted his room for maneuver. Some dogs clearly felt they could take advantage of this, and I commonly interposed myself between them and him. But one day a particularly obnoxious little dog, having passed us going in the opposite direction growling noisily but kept at a distance by me, decided to double back and make a sneak attack from the rear. Neither of us saw it coming. The dog sank its teeth fiercely into Emile's flank, and then, as he wheeled to face it, it darted off down the street and into an alley. Emile looked up at me. I reached down and unhooked the leash from his collar. Five or ten minutes later he came trotting back with that big smile on his face.

I had a party one night at the new place my girlfriend and I had rented in a house on Maryland Street. (A sexplex, actually.) A lot of my girlfriend's friends were there, as well as many of mine, and as was usual at our parties there were people I didn't know, people she didn't know, and even people neither of us knew. One of the latter was a burly steelworker known as Big Mike. He'd come along with someone from the pub

where I spent much of my time in the evenings. Mike had fists big as hams and hard as bone. He was a plain-looking man with sandy hair and a bloodshot, pock-marked face, sallow blue eyes and a swollen nose. He was sitting by himself in a chair against the wall when Emile (and I) first noticed him. Emile's hair stood straight up, from his neck to his haunches, and his lip curled as he uttered a long low growl.

"If that dog bites me," Mike said, looking at me, "I'm going to break its neck."

"If you lay a hand on my dog," I replied, smiling, leaning in close to his face and trying to sound as matter-of-fact as I could, "I'll kill you."

He smiled slightly. "Who the hell are you?"

"This is my house. I'm the host. Who are you?"

"Mike," he said. "You got any more beer?"

"Sure." I was considerably relieved that mortal combat was not imminent. "And if we run out, we can always go get some." Emile by this time was satisfied that Mike was no threat and had wandered off to do something else. He liked parties.

Big Mike and I had become special friends in that little moment of truth and we remained so for many years. Most of the time he was quite gentlemanly, and he was ostentatiously chivalrous toward women. But he had a terrible temper and often became violent, especially when he was drunk. Then he would lash out at anyone. Once when I wasn't around he laid out a cop who had said something disagreeable to him. When several other cops arrived to arrest him he fought them, too, until finally they beat him unconscious.

On other occasions, though, when he was raging and seemed to be on the verge of killing someone in my presence, I'd step between them and, with my eyes only inches away from his, talk him down until the situation was resolved without mayhem. I never felt the slightest apprehension when I was doing this, but afterwards I always marveled that I'd gotten away with it. Once when I asked him why he let me do it he professed to be afraid of me, which seemed ludicrous in view of the fact that he was three inches

taller and fifty pounds heavier than I was and could easily have dispatched me any time he wanted to. I genuinely liked Mike and I suspect he enjoyed this little game. Maybe he appreciated the fact that I'd saved him more than a few times from assaulting some idiot who hadn't had enough sense not to provoke him. In a way he was a little like Emile. You didn't have to like him; he couldn't care less. But you'd better not mess with him, because he'd just as soon hit you as look at you.

Like many dogs, given the opportunity Emile liked to sleep in the street. Our place was at the corner of a busy four-lane avenue and a smaller side street which had, for the year or so we'd lived there, been blocked off with steel guardrail from the avenue. So, except for the people who lived in our house, nobody ever drove up there. One day, though, the city decided to remove the barricades and Maryland became a through street. Nevertheless, Emile was used to sleeping out there—it was his street—and I couldn't seem to dissuade him from doing it.

Maryland Street sloped downhill from its intersection with Fifth Avenue and so our apartment, which was on the ground level in the front, was a full story off the ground in the back. The house had ceilings about eleven feet high—not uncommon in those days—and our kitchen had several large windows that overlooked a little back yard and most of the block on Maryland.

One morning I happened to glance out the back window and saw Emile sleeping soundly on his side in the middle of the street. Just then a big old Chrysler came around the corner from below. It wasn't going fast but I could tell that the driver didn't see the dog. And that the car was going to run right over him. I wanted to cry out, but no sound came from my lips. It probably wouldn't have mattered, because it was over in an instant. I heard the thuds and bumps as the car's undercarriage pummeled him into the pavement. The driver never slowed down. I ran downstairs and out toward Emile. But he was already up and staggering toward me. The look on his face was as if to say, "Some aliens just jumped out of a UFO and kicked my ass." He was clearly dazed and

probably badly hurt. But he could walk and nothing seemed to be broken. For two or three days he moved around sparingly and slowly, with obvious difficulty. He was sore and stiff and content to spend most of his time sleeping in the kitchen. Finally one day he seemed to feel better, his old normal self. And that very day he went back out into the street and lay down again. I saw him do it and called him back over to the yard. He came rather too willingly, I thought, as if he'd hoped for an excuse not to return to his old habit. He needed one because he wasn't about to be intimidated by any stupid car, or aliens, or whatever it was.

Each summer in the early sixties, when I was a beatnik poet and sometime furniture maker, I hitchhiked at least once and sometimes twice from Pittsburgh to the west coast and back. Usually I left Emile behind—which he of course hated. Whoever'd taken care of him would often say afterward he'd behaved as if he were in mourning. But on at least two occasions I took him along. Needless to say he was a trouper. Life on the road, even for a street dog, isn't always easy. But he never complained. Even if we were wet and cold and hungry, even if he had to wait sometimes a long time to relieve himself, he maintained his composure. He loved to hang out with me, and I loved to travel. Despite the hardships it sometimes meant for him, he always seemed to enjoy being on the road.

One time we were returning from the coast in a driveaway car, a big old Chevrolet convertible. In return for $50 cash on delivery, I'd agreed to drive the car from San Francisco to New Jersey and pay all expenses. This was the time before the Interstate system. Most of the trip was on two-lane highways, where you'd actually pass through towns and see people outdoors and smell the fresh-cut hay and stop by little rivers on hot afternoons to swim and cool off.

It'd been a searing day coming through northern Nevada and western Utah, but late in the afternoon it was starting to cool off just a bit. I'd put the top up on the convertible but the huge Chevy door windows were rolled down all the way. About

eight o'clock, when the evening light had begun to shade toward reddish gold, we rolled into a typical small Utah town with genteel streets and a sedate speed limit. Presently we were in a residential neighborhood of modest two-story wood houses with flowerbeds and manicured lawns and fine old trees shading the sidewalks.

As we drove along one particular block, I saw a stop sign ahead. And I noticed to my right a group of a dozen or so adults standing together on a porch, talking to one another and watching their children playing on the lawn below. Somewhat separate from the children was also a playgroup of four or five dogs, chasing one another's tails, leaping up and down, merrily and mindlessly amusing themselves.

Suddenly, Emile leaped out the window of the moving car. As I rolled past the idyllic family scene, trying to appear casual, en route to stopping at the intersection, he bounded over the sidewalk, raced across the manicured lawn and plowed into the cluster of cavorting and oblivious dogs, which instantly erupted into an incredible free-for-all dogfight, a spinning, yelping, snarling, yipping, boiling chaos of dogs slashing and biting, with fur flying in every direction. It was magnificent. And then, just as suddenly, he burst out from the swirling melee and made a mad dash for the car, now stopped at the intersection. I opened the door for him and he jumped in. The fracas continued undiminished as we drove away.

I couldn't stop trying to imagine what this experience must've been like for the people standing there in their neat and peaceful little neighborhood that evening, chatting and watching the kids at play, when, apropos of nothing whatever, a strange dog from nowhere barrelled into the yard, attacked a bunch of neighborhood dogs and commenced a huge dogfight, then sped off and jumped into a passing car which drove away and never was seen again. I laugh my ass off every time I recall this. I think he did too.

A year or two later Emile accompanied my third wife and me on a six-week tour of most of the major western national parks. I took him on other trips, too. So by the time

he was eight years old, Emile had been to New York City twice, camped in the Canadian woods several times, and peed in more than twenty states. He'd lived in a West Texas oil town, and, for slightly more than a year, in West Hollywood. He'd been to Mount Rushmore and the Badlands, to Devil's Tower, to an Indian medicine wheel ten thousand feet up in the mountains of Wyoming, to Yellowstone and Jackson Hole, to Crater Lake, Death Valley, the Grand Canyon, and even the Smoky Mountains. He'd crossed the Mississippi and the Continental Divide at least six times. He'd been around.

After I graduated from the University of Pittsburgh at the age of thirty-one I decided to go to graduate school at the University of Washington in Seattle. I was divorced yet again and eager to move west, to make my fortune on the frontier, to taste the freedom of a new land, to escape the culture of the old east, so rooted in its long history and so stultified by the unquestioned authority of its giants and myths and habits. Little did I imagine, nor for a long time would I realize, that I would profoundly miss many of these very things, that I would find in the new northwest a corollary of every one of these strictures, less sophisticated, sometimes even quaint, but equally mindless and equally immune to reformation. Nonetheless, as has often been noted, ignorance often gives us courage for ventures that experience would never undertake.

So it was that Emile crossed the plains and the crest of the Rockies once again. This time it was to take up residence in Seattle. We lived in several different places during our two years there. His favorite was the apartment of a woman I knew who lived on the shore of Puget Sound. (He was always a big hit with the ladies.) He loved to play on the beach, to chase gulls and bite the waves. He also liked going to afternoon rock sessions in the parks, which often continued far into the night. He enjoyed the people, I think, more than the dogs.

He liked the outdoors, of course, but the city was really his milieu, especially when he was young. When we'd camped in the lake district of southern Ontario, we were occasionally visited in the middle of the night by indigenous people who wanted to

share some whiskey or trade for American cigarettes. They were always agreeable companions, but they appeared from the shadows and melted back into the dark woods without a sound, and they made Emile very nervous. As we slept we were frequently attacked by black flies, which were adept at discovering any bit of exposed flesh, such as lips and eyelids, that wasn't slathered in fly repellent. During the day we'd get in a rented boat and motor out over the water, past one island and then another and another until we were completely lost. I'd fish awhile and then we'd go ashore on some little island and just wander around. He liked that all right, but an uninhabited island is really not rife with interesting smells or keen things to do.

When we moved to Seattle I became a camping fool. We camped at Jackson Hole one night and met a recently married couple fresh from Woodstock who shared a bottle of honeymoon champagne with me. Emile enjoyed the company of strangers anytime I did. But most of the sights here and at Yellowstone were off-limits to dogs, and he spent a lot of time in the car.

We camped once in a Forest Service site on Taylor Creek, just east of the Snoqualmie summit, at about 3500 feet. The weather was gorgeous. We walked through the woods and played in the water most of the day. One evening, just before supper, a brown bear showed up. Emile barked at it energetically, from a respectful distance, but it seemed not to notice. It ripped up a couple of garbage cans and lumbered away. Just knowing it was around made both of us a little jumpy.

A year or so later we were camped northeast of Chelan, beside a little lake hidden in a steep canyon. We'd camped there for two weeks the summer before and we hadn't seen another soul the whole time we were there. This time we were accompanied by my ex-wife, and, there being no one else around, she and I went almost as soon as we arrived to the shore of the lake, where we shed our clothes and dove into the clear, cold water. No sooner had we clambered out and arranged ourselves to bask in the warmth of the late afternoon sun than Emile, who was hidden from view fifty yards away at the

campsite, started to bark excitedly.

We struggled into some clothes and hurried up to the campsite, fully expecting to see a human interloper. Suddenly I heard another sound. I'd never heard it before, but I knew instantly what it was: a rattlesnake. Emile was about three feet away from it as it lay coiled and rattling under a pine tree. He continued barking until I pinned it down and decapitated it.

In retrospect, I'm not sure he really enjoyed camping. Not as much as I did anyway. There were too many strange critters he felt obliged to contend with but didn't really understand.

After two years in Seattle, when Emile was about twelve, beginning to get arthritic and more than a little gray around his muzzle, we moved several hundred miles south to Oregon. Just before we left I acquired a young black labrador pup, not quite a year old. This didn't really sit well with Emile, but he tolerated the new addition to our long-exclusive little wolf pack. Muffa was easy to tolerate because he had no aim in life other than to play. He spent the long sunny autumn afternoons racing around under the trees and leaping high into the air, trying to catch falling leaves. When he wasn't doing this he was splashing in the creek or digging in the garden or chasing his shadow.

One day, toward the beginning of the rainy season in late October, Muffa fell ill. In the span of a week he went from quiet to listless to mortally incoherent. The vet said it was distemper, and there was nothing to be done. Within a few days he was dead. It was such a waste of a happy and goofy and vibrant life. Emile seemed to miss him as much as I did.

The house at Fall Creek was situated about a hundred feet from the creek and almost as far, on the other side, from a lazy country road. We had seven acres of flat, deep riverbottom land that lay alongside Little Fall Creek for the last thousand feet or so before it merged with Big Fall Creek, and then formed the north bank of the westward-flowing confluence, Fall Creek, for another quarter mile. In the summertime the creek

was about fifty feet wide and maybe eight feet deep in the middle. In the winter, when the rains fell and the snow melted up in the hills, the creek could become twice that deep and three times as wide, a brawling, thundering torrent of foaming brown water, full of soil and rocks and tree trunks and fascinating danger. A wild, powerful storm of nature. But in the summer it was tame and clear and gentle. Beavers and otters lived along its shores. Steelhead salmon and brown trout swam and spawned in its pools. Ducks and herons, ospreys and even an occasional eagle flew above the stream and took sustenance from it. Its banks were lined with alder and cottonwood and blackberries.

In the summer our back yard was six or seven feet above the creek surface. The half of the yard nearest the creek was occupied by a vegetable garden which extended along the the creek bank for about a hundred feet and was roughly thirty feet wide. There was a path at one end of the garden that sloped down to the water's edge. Many a day I came home from work in town, hot and grimy and mad and tired, got out of my car, shed my clothes as I walked across the yard, plunged naked into that cold water, and felt instantly refreshed and renewed. It is not enough to say it was a wonderful place. It was paradise. I often felt glad that Emile had lived long enough to enjoy a couple of years there. I know he liked the easygoing life. There were few camping trips and no more journeys to the other coast. We were together constantly. I suspect that, like me, he felt there, for the first time, truly at home and at peace.

Sometimes in the evening, when dogs up and down the valley bayed their presence to the moon, he and I would stand out in the darkness, blending our howling voices into the eerily shifting harmonies of this lovely, lonely, primordial song that rose into the night air and rang through the wrinkled hills.

The second winter in Fall Creek was memorably rough. In an area where an entire winter often passed without more than one or two days of mildly freezing temperatures, and where the calendar year had ended without any at all, we had in January an arctic fortnight of temperatures well below zero during the day, and ten degrees colder than

that at night. After a day or two all the water lines froze. Even the creek froze. We could walk across it. I had to use an inch-thick iron bar to cut a hole in the ice so we could have water for the toilet and water to wash in and cook with, all of which I carried up to the house in five-gallon buckets. During this time I continued to work long hours in my job as a medic at a local free clinic, and I contracted pneumonia. Dragging forty-pound buckets of water up a steep, rimy, icy slope in the dead of winter when you have pneumonia is no picnic. It wasn't easy on Emile, either. His paws were often painfully jammed with hard-frozen slush. We didn't eat well. He spent long hours in the car, where it was cold of course but he preferred that always to staying at home, which in those days was no warmer anyway.

One Saturday afternoon a chinook wind arrived and the temperature shot up maybe fifty degrees in a few hours. The breeze died down a little that night but the thermometer remained above freezing. Then on Sunday the warm winds really got underway. By midmorning it was over sixty degrees. Snow was melting in the mountains. The thick shelf of ice across the creek, softened by the warm air and strained by the urgent press of water beneath it, began to creak and moan. Within hours the ice on Little Fall Creek started to break up, and suddenly it all came unglued at once. A rush of water laden with great hunks of ice slammed into the intersection of the creeks, backfilling until it had created a dam perhaps ten feet high and a hundred feet long. Then it swelled over its banks, and with an audible roar it inundated our east field, a boiling tide of water charged with icebergs the size of refrigerators, rolling, tumbling, chewing through the soft earth. Within ten or fifteen minutes it had dug a broad gully back to the streambed below the confluence, just upstream from the garden. Thousands of cubic yards of soil went with it. All in the span of maybe twenty minutes. Paradise had been badly scarred.

As spring progressed that year Emile began to look and act very much older. He wasn't sick, but he'd lost a dozen pounds and a noticeable portion of his muscle mass.

He seemed thin and brittle. The hair on his muzzle, once a rich golden brown with accents of black, was now almost wholly white. His eyes became less bright, his ears less alert. He lost a couple of big molar teeth. His movements seemed more awkward and slow and occasionally painful.

Eventually he could no longer manage to negotiate the four steps from the front porch to the yard. So for a few days, as he grew weaker, I carried him. Then he couldn't stand well enough to go to the bathroom. So I held him up. A few days later he could not get to his feet at all without my help. I knew the end was near.

The next day, or the next after that, morning dawned bright and beautiful. The grass outside was its most brilliant emerald green in the early summer light. The trees were lush with leaves. The two huge climbing rosebushes that draped up and over the roof of the pumphouse were suffused with crimson blossoms. Lilacs, irises, daffodils, tulips—all sorts of flowers were in bloom. There were a few new crops poking up in the garden, though most of the planting had yet to be done. Perhaps it was late May.

I found a small piece of plywood, two by three feet or so, and lifted Emile onto it. I noted sadly that he didn't struggle against this indignity. He was too weak to care. I carried him down to the side of the creek, just above the little path at the edge of the garden. The sun shone through the leaves of an overhanging tree and played across the grass where we rested together, watching the water drift by, listening to the gentle breeze that brushed along its surface. For several hours I sat there with him, talking to him, remembering the things we had seen, the places we'd gone and the people we'd met. He seemed to be at peace. Now and then he would look up, raising his head with some effort, his thin neck now burdened by his collar and its many medals, of which he was so fond.

Around noon I carried him to the van and drove him to the vet. I stood beside him and held his head in my arms as the doctor eased a needle into a leg vein flaccid as wet yarn. His great heart could do no more. Then suddenly I felt his life vanish. So quickly.

So finally. Like a sigh of wind that sifts through the trees and then passes, leaving an endless silence in its wake.

Epilogue

There is a story in old Hindu literature about a young man who's a great hunter. One day he comes upon a fine dog and for many years they are inseparable. The dog makes countless contributions to their adventures, exhibiting time and again all the well-known canine virtues: devotion, courage, optimism, compassion, intelligence. In time the dog dies, and many years later the man dies as well. In the afterlife the companions are reunited, but when they arrive at the gate of heaven the hunter is told that, while he is more than welcome, his dog—not having a human soul—may not enter.

Many wondrous qualities of the heavenly afterworld are described and demonstrated for the old hunter, but he is firm in resolution that, whatever the consequence, he will not abandon his faithful friend. So the two of them turn away from the gate of heaven and wander back into the shadows of the forest. Suddenly a bright light appears and the dog is transformed into a mighty god, Vishnu by name, who commends the man for his fidelity.

This is a parable, of course, so I can't expect it to actually happen. But I believe that love imbues everything with a sacred spirit, and I wouldn't think much of a heaven, however charming otherwise, that excluded anything or anyone I ever loved. So if there is an afterlife, and I run into Emile there, well, heaven can take us or leave us. Vishnu or not, I do hope he keeps his old dog form. I'd like to thump his ribs, tickle his feet, rub his silky ear on my cheek, howl with him at the moon, plumb the bottomless depths of his earnest brown eyes. I really would.